

Section 2.1

2022/23 Oxfordshire County Council budget consultation report

This report sets out the key findings from Oxfordshire County Council's budget consultation, carried out between 2 December 2021 and 5 January 2022, to support the 2022/23 budget and business planning setting process.

Executive summary

In total, the council received **1,390** completed online survey responses and **two** email responses.

Respondent profile

- Ninety-five per cent of the survey respondents (1,327) identified themselves as Oxfordshire residents.
- Five per cent (63) were identified as other stakeholders: district, city or county councillors, parish or town councillors or representatives, non-residents, business representatives, council employees, groups/organisations, anonymous.

Approach to savings

- A clear majority of survey respondents (eighty per cent) **disagreed with reducing spending on frontline services**, with only ten per cent actively agreeing.
- Survey respondents' **top three approaches to making savings** from the list provided (and their own ideas), were:
 - Reducing spending on staffing by redesigning services, using less temporary agency staff and/or holding vacancies (chosen 682 times as a top three approach).
 - Reducing staff costs by supporting long-term flexible working eg working at home to reduce printing, travel and energy costs (chosen 664 times as a top three approach).
 - Reducing costs by using digital technology to deliver services more efficiently (chosen 560 times as a top three approach).

Council tax

- Just over half (52 per cent) of the **survey respondents** said they agreed with a proposed council tax increase of 4.99 per cent, including three per cent specifically for adult social care, whereas 41 per cent disagreed and six per cent did not know.
- Focusing specifically on how **Oxfordshire residents** responded to the proposed council tax increase, 51 per cent said yes they supported this increase (679 respondents), whereas 42 per cent (558 respondents) said no they did not. Seven per cent (87 respondents) did not know.

Budget proposals

- While all survey respondents were given the opportunity to provide comments on our budget proposals and signposted to the full budget papers (as published for the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee), most people used this opportunity to make more general comments. There were, however, 17 mentions for 'more spending on road repairs'.

Strategic priorities

- Of the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance's nine priority themes, respondents deemed the following two priorities to be the **most important** for the council to concentrate on:
 - Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents (chosen 484 times as a top two priority)
 - Support carers and social care system (chosen 464 times as a top two priority)

Approach

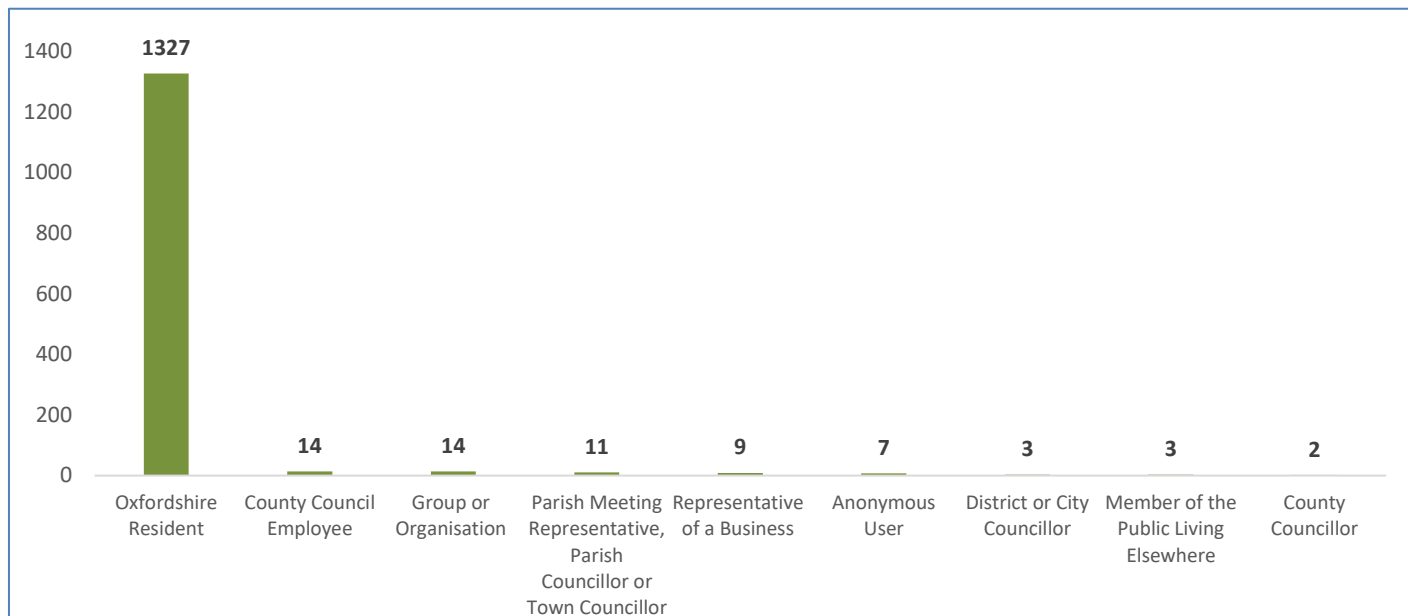
1. Between 2 December 2021 and 5 January 2022, the council invited comments on its budget proposals for 2022/23, including its proposed council tax increase. Residents and stakeholders were also signposted to a supporting consultation booklet for background information and to the published budget reports.
2. Feedback was primarily collated using an online survey on the council's digital consultation and engagement platform, Let's Talk Oxfordshire, with residents and stakeholders also being able to submit comments by email. A small number of paper copies of the consultation booklet and promotional posters were distributed to libraries and arrangements were put in place to supply information in alternative formats on request.
3. The budget consultation was actively promoted to a wide range of audiences using multiple channels (media, social media and other digital platforms, the website, advertising) and to staff, and councillors to help them spread the word. The social media posts stimulated some comments. Where genuine questions were raised, we responded to clarify any misunderstandings and provide helpful information.

Responses and feedback

4. In total, the council received **1,390** online survey responses and **two** email responses, which were all from stakeholders. These are summarised after the responses to the online survey at the end of the report. Not everyone answered each question in the online survey (as was permitted) and the data in this report focuses on the total number of people who answered each question.
5. Ninety-five per cent of survey respondents (1,327) identified themselves as Oxfordshire residents. The remainder five per cent (63) were identified as other stakeholders: district, city or county councillors, parish or

town councillors or representatives, non-Oxfordshire residents, business representatives, council employees, groups/organisations or were anonymous. These are referred to as stakeholders in the report (as opposed to residents). A full breakdown of who responded to the survey is shown in the chart below.

Chart 1: Profile of survey respondents



6. In terms of the demographic profile of respondents (where information was provided):
 - Slightly more men (51 per cent) than women (41 per cent) completed the survey.
 - A large majority (79 per cent) of survey respondents were aged over 45 years and only one per cent was aged under twenty-four.
 - The majority (83 per cent) of the survey respondents are white British, Irish, Scottish or any other white background, while all other ethnicities made up a very small proportion (5 per cent).

7. This consultation feedback will be shared as follows:
 - This consultation report will be shared with councillors to support the budget setting process at the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet and full Council meetings.
 - The report will be published on the council's digital consultation and engagement platform, Let's Talk Oxfordshire, with a link to the meetings. This will be supplemented by a 'you said, we did' update on Let's Talk Oxfordshire after decisions have been made.
 - A deposit of all consultation responses (suitably redacted to comply with GDPR) will be compiled and made available internally on request.

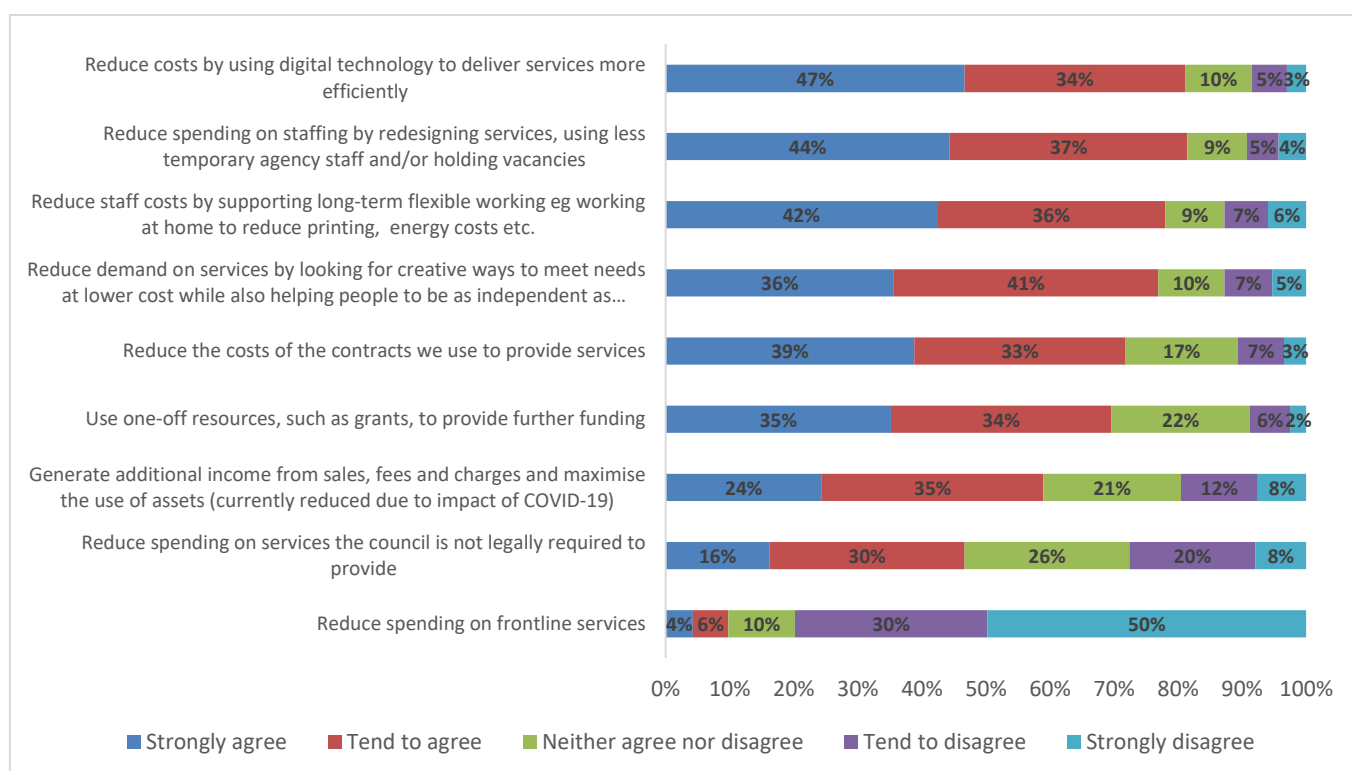
Approach to savings

8. People were that informed that 'Oxfordshire County Council alongside all other local authorities faces an uncertain funding situation. We want funding to go

where it is most needed and invest in services that will have a positive long-term impact for our local communities. To do that, we plan to make £13 million of new savings in 2022/23 focusing on making services more efficient while protecting the frontline. There are different approaches the council could take to make savings.'

9. They were then presented with nine different approaches the council could take to make savings. We asked, 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following?' A rating scale was set for: strongly agree; tend to agree; neither agree nor disagree; tend to disagree; strongly disagree.
10. The chart below shows the spread of responses across the nine options and has a base figure of 1,370 respondents. It is ranked in descending order of total agreement.

Chart 2: Views on all proposed approaches to making savings



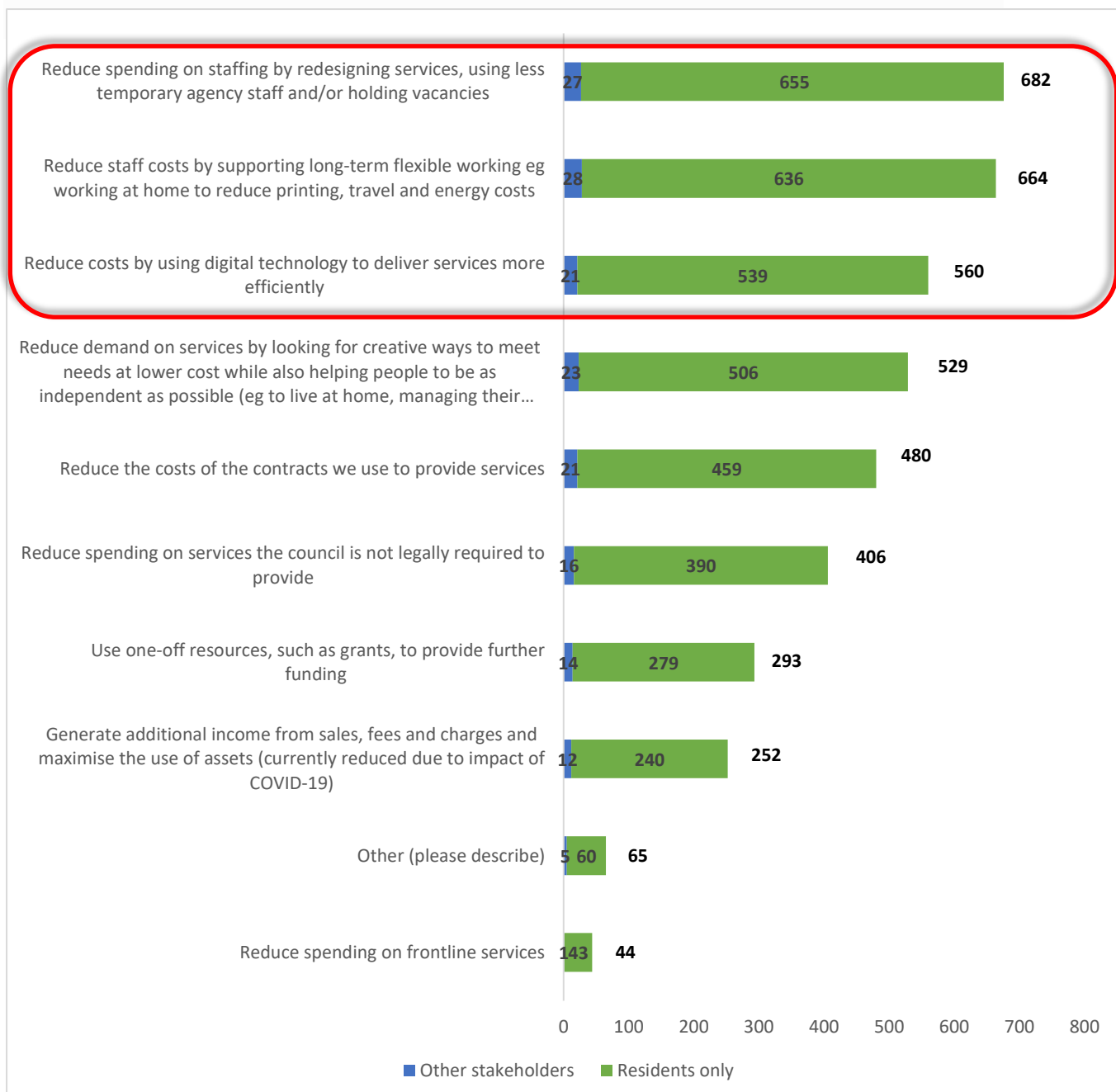
11. A clear majority of respondents (eighty per cent) **disagreed with reducing spending on frontline services**, with only ten per cent actively agreeing.

12. Respondents were also **less receptive** to the council reducing spending on services the council is not legally required to provide (to note though, however, **46 per cent agreed**). At least one in five respondents disagreed with the proposed approach to create additional income from sales, fees and charges and maximise the use of assets (currently reduced due to the impact of COVID-19). Twenty per cent disagreed, 26 per cent were undecided, saying they neither agreed nor disagreed, and, as above, 46 per cent agreed.

13. Respondents were **most receptive** to the council using the following five proposed approaches, with **over three in four** respondents in agreement.
- Reducing costs by using digital technology to deliver services more efficiently (81 per cent agreement, including 47 per cent who strongly agreed).
 - Reducing spending on staffing by redesigning services, using less temporary agency staff and/or holding vacancies (81 per cent agreement, including 44 per cent who strongly agreed).
 - Reducing staff costs by supporting long-term flexible working eg working at home to reduce printing, travel and energy costs (78 per cent agreement, including 42 per cent who strongly agreed).
 - Reducing demand on services by looking for creative ways to meet needs at lower cost while also helping people to be as independent as possible eg to live at home, managing their own finances, etc (77 per cent agreement, including 36 per cent who strongly agreed).
14. We offered people the opportunity to **suggest their own approaches** to making savings and whilst 393 respondents said they had ideas, only 376 of these shared their thoughts with us through the consultation survey.
15. They included:
- focus on core services
 - cut staff pay / pensions / managers
 - improve efficiency
 - more government funding needed
 - amalgamate councils / council services
 - limit and control contactors
 - more care with projects (particularly traffic related)
 - increase revenues (council tax and parking charges).
16. All councillors will be able to view the full feedback in the consultation deposit should they wish.
17. When respondents were asked to select their **top three approaches**, these were:
- Reducing spending on staffing by redesigning services, using less temporary agency staff and/or holding vacancies (chosen 682 times as a top three approach).
 - Reducing staff costs by supporting long-term flexible working eg working at home to reduce printing, travel and energy costs (chosen 664 times as a top three approach).
 - Reducing costs by using digital technology to deliver services more efficiently (chosen 560 times as a top three approach).
18. Overall, preferences are broadly consistent with the previous question (chart 2 shown above), although the order in which they are ranked has shifted slightly. Reducing spending on frontline services remains the least preferred approach, only chosen 44 times as a top three approach.

19. The stacked bar chart below, which has a base of 1,388 respondents, shows survey respondents' top three preferences in rank order. The bars give the total number of times the approach was selected as a top three approach and how it is split between Oxfordshire residents and other stakeholders. Please note that some people chose the idea(s) they put forward in their top three and this is shown as 'other'.

Chart 3: Top three preferred proposed approaches to making savings



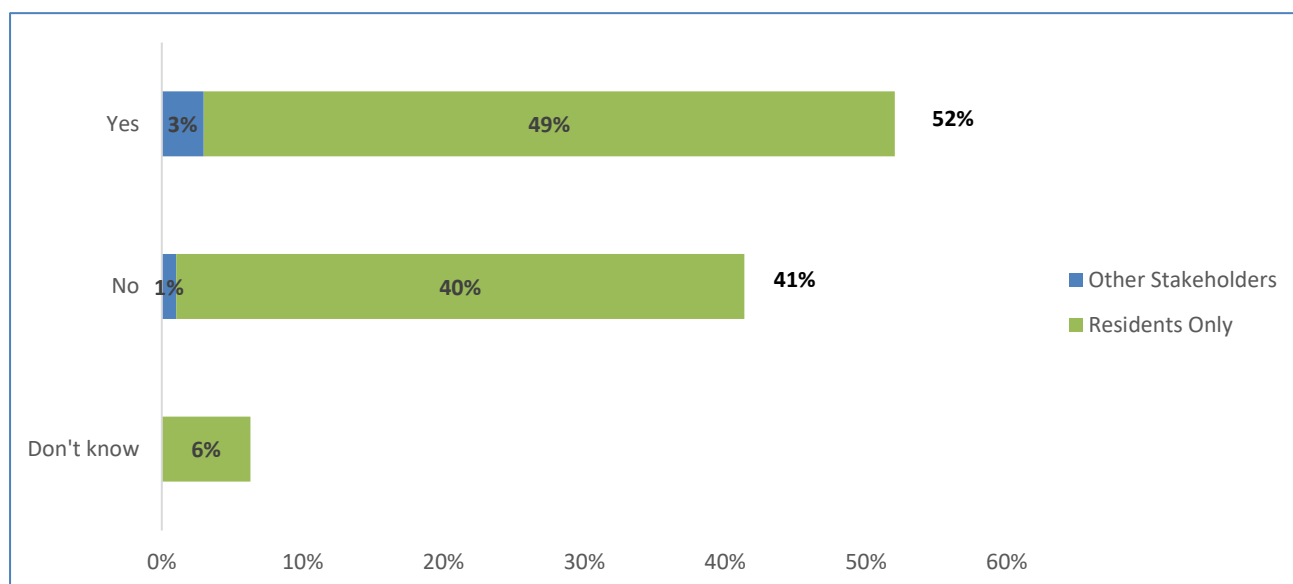
Proposed council tax increase

20. We informed people that in 2022/23, we propose to increase council tax by 4.99 per cent, including three per cent specifically for adult social care and asked if they would be prepared to support this proposed increase. We clarified that an increase of 4.99 per cent is equal to an additional £78.50 per year or £1.51 per week in council tax on a Band D property.

21. Just over half (52 per cent) of the respondents said they agreed with a proposed council tax increase, whereas 41 per cent disagreed and six per cent did not know.

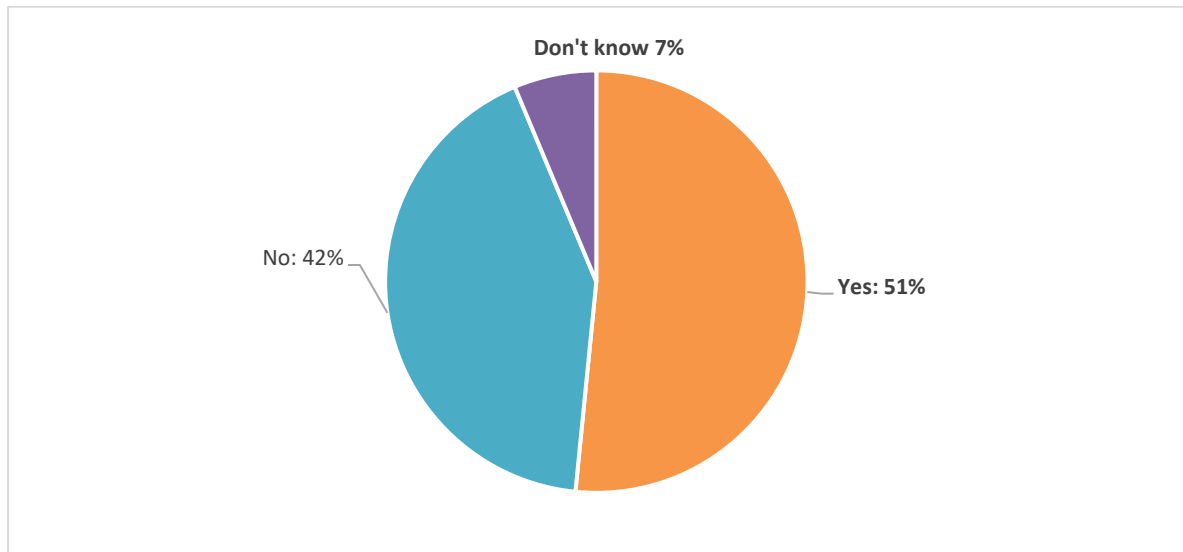
22. The stacked bar chart below, which has a base of 1,383 respondents, shows how people responded. The bar gives the total percentage and how it is split between Oxfordshire residents and other stakeholders.

Chart 4: Would you be prepared to support the proposed council tax increase? (All respondents)



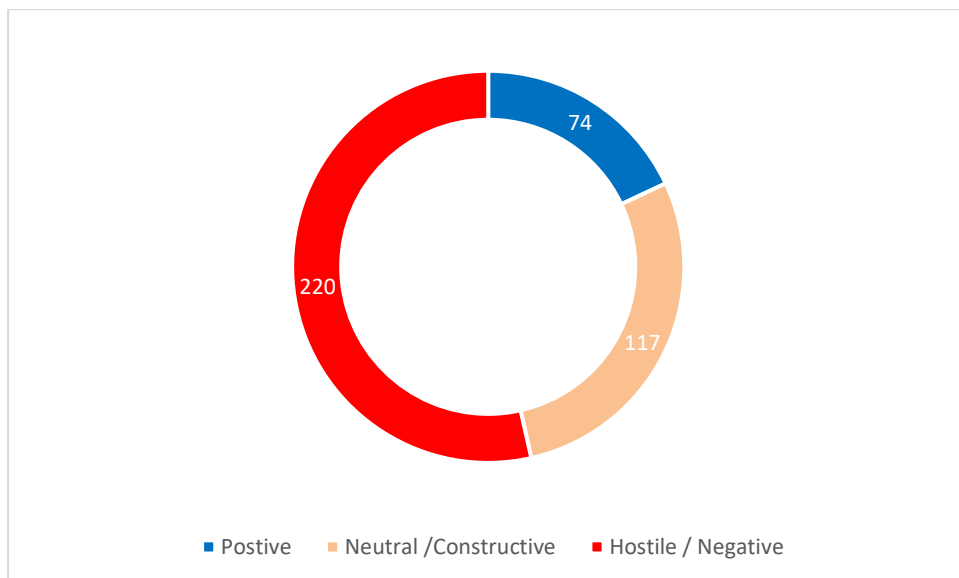
23. Focusing specifically on how **Oxfordshire residents** responded to the proposed council tax increase, 51 per cent said yes they supported this increase (679 respondents), whereas 42 per cent (558 respondents) said no they did not. Seven per cent (87 respondents) did not know.

Chart 5: Would you be prepared to support the proposed council tax increase? (Oxfordshire residents only. Base: 1,324 respondents)



24. Four hundred and eleven respondents gave further feedback to support their response. A sentiment analysis of the feeling expressed in the comments shows that 53 per cent of comments (220) were hostile/negative in tone, 28 per cent (117) were neutral or constructive and 18 per cent (74) were positive.

Chart 6: Sentiment analysis on the range of feelings (Base: 411 respondents who answered this question)



25. Hostility/negativity tended to come together around four themes:
- The increase cannot be afforded, often based on a perception that others cannot afford.
 - Existing services are so poor that no increase could be justified.
 - Local councils are wasteful and inefficient, including a perception from some that staff are overpaid.
 - Levels of taxation are high enough already.
26. Some of those who were comfortable paying the council tax increase suggested that bigger increases could be justified. Others who agreed to payment added caveats that the extra revenue should be spent well. Frequently, those with neutral/constructive responses (such as the need for more progressive taxation) accepted the need for an increase.
27. The main themes are summarised in the table below, shown in rank order of comments per theme.

Table 1: Comments to support response to council tax question

	Residents (number of comments)	Other stakeholders (number of comments)	Total (number of comments)
Can't afford	86	1	87
Yes to increase to preserve services	69	5	74
Taxed enough already	62	0	62
Existing services don't justify	43	2	45
Find more progressive taxation	34	2	36
More government funding needed	26	1	27
More information needed	24	2	26
Council is wasteful and inefficient	23	3	26
Needs ring fencing	16	0	16
Less consultants/contractors	6	1	7
Families should pay for adult care	5	0	5

28. All councillors will be able to view the full feedback in the consultation deposit should they wish.

General comments on the council's budget proposals

29. All survey respondents were given the opportunity to provide comments on our budget proposals. Although signposted to the full budget papers as published for Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, most people used this opportunity to make more general comments.
30. Table 2 and 3 below summarise the key themes shared. For residents, entries shown in table 2 are capped at a minimum of four mentions. All councillors will be able to view the full feedback in the consultation deposit should they wish.

Table 2: Most frequently mentioned comments put forward by residents

	(Number of mentions)
Council officers overpaid and inefficient	29
More information needed	22
More spending on road repair	17
Less cars, more public transport	14
Can't afford council tax increases	12
Restructure / overall required	7
Protect frontline services	7
Inadequate government funding	5
Sell council property	4
Too green focused	4
Don't cut staff	2

Table 3: Comments put forward by other stakeholders (number of mentions)

	Staff	County Councillors	District councillors	Organisation	Parishes council	Business
Don't cut staff	3					
More climate and environment		1				
Inadequate government funding		1				
More spending on road repairs			1			
Less cars, more transport	1			1		
Protect vulnerable	1			1		
Amalgamate councils						
Care needed with assumptions						1
Invest to improve					1	
Specific issue				1		

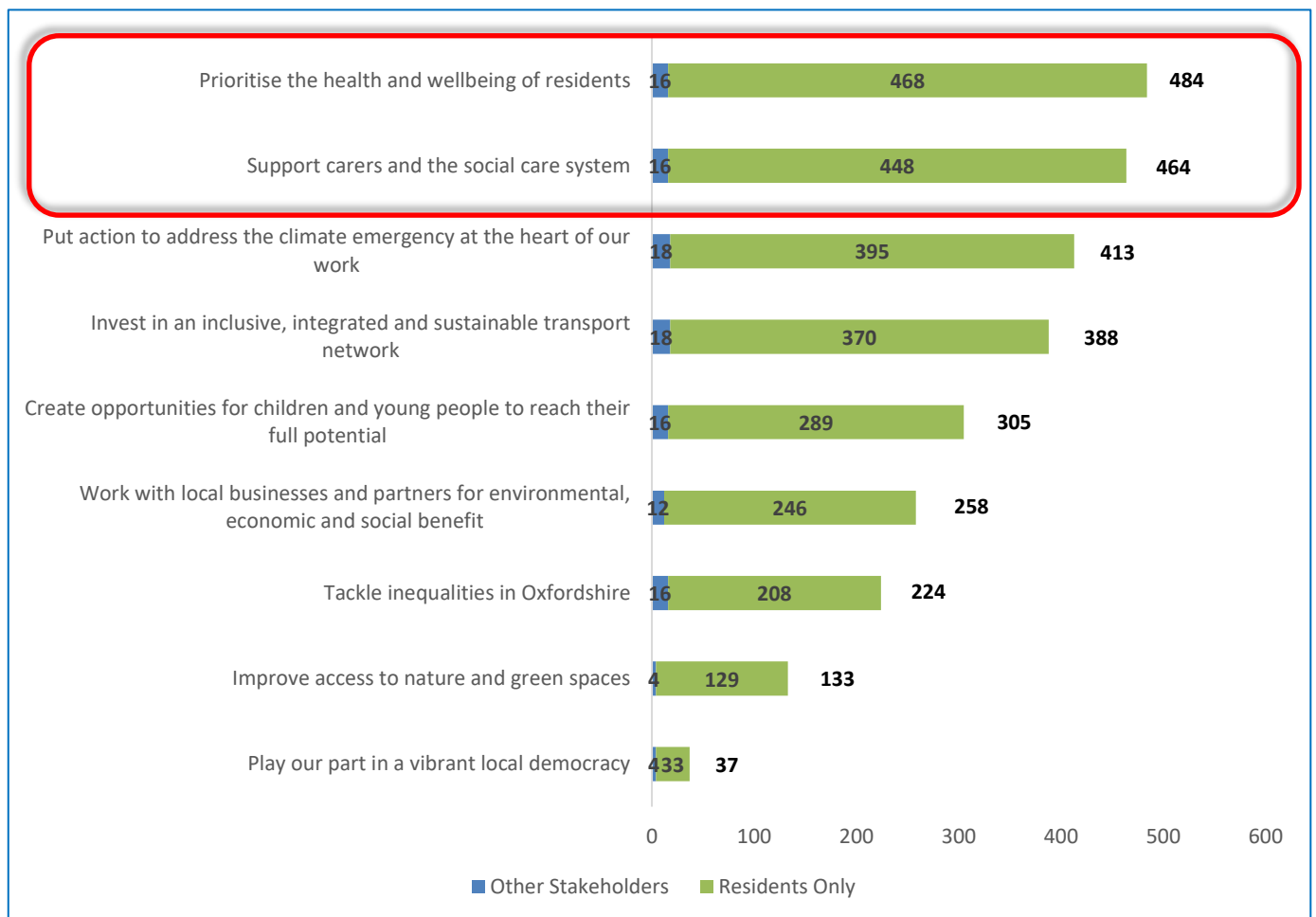
Shaping our strategic plan

31. Survey participants were told that every year the council reviews its priority themes as part of its budget setting process. Taking account of the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance's nine priorities as they currently stand (the priorities were set

out in full), they were asked which **two** they consider to be most important for the council to concentrate on.

32. The stacked bar chart below, which has a base of 1,353 respondents, shows how people responded. The bars give the total number of times a priority was chosen as a top two theme and how it is split between Oxfordshire residents and other stakeholders.

Chart 7: Preferred priority themes



33. Of the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance’s nine priority themes, respondents deemed the following two priorities to be the **most important** for the council to concentrate on:

- Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents (chosen 484 times as a top two priority)
- Support carers and social care system (chosen 464 times as a top two priority)

34. These were closely followed by:

- Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of its work (chosen 413 times as top two priority – ranked second in the recent council’s statistically representative residents’ survey).
- Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network (chosen 388 times as top two priority – ranked fifth in the recent council’s statistically representative residents’ survey).
- Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential (chosen 305 times as top two priority – ranked fourth in the recent council’s statistically representative residents’ survey)

35. Nine hundred and eighty respondents gave further feedback as to clarify their specific selections.

- Reviewing the comments, people selected ‘prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents’ and ‘support carers and social care system’ because they considered these to be core functions for the council.
- Regarding the selection of climate change, people considered this to be a critical global issue.
- Some responders who didn’t choose climate change as a priority acknowledged its importance.
- Some responders suggested linkages existed between the priorities, for example:
 - public transport linked to social care / environment / economy
 - climate change linked to the future of young people
 - inequalities linked to health care.
- Some responders suggested that climate change was not a local issue and local government shouldn’t be focused on it.

36. All councillors will be able to view the full feedback in the consultation deposit should they wish.

Summary for the email responses

37. **Two** email responses were received in addition to the online survey and these are summarised below.

Submission one:

The first submission was from an individual wishing to further expand their survey response and in particular their feedback on each of the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance’s nine priorities. This person also put forward a suggestion that the council may wish to consider adopting the method of quality function deployment with regards to its budget consultation and gave an example of how this process works in practice.

Submission two:

The second submission was from Railfuture – Thames Valley Branch, who state that it welcomes and supports the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance’s priority regarding investment in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network. It also put

forward its views regarding progress with the Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Strategy and about changes to the local bus network under the government's bus strategy with regards to railway station access.

11 January 2021